Blind-sided by Basics: three perspectives on income management in an Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory

Jon Altman

Abstract

Income management was introduced into the Northern Territory in 2007. Despite much rhetoric around evidence-based policy making and constant reviewing of income management, there has been little grounded research about Aboriginal responses at the community level to this new institution. In this article I report on the operations of income management from a longer-term perspective, working with Kuninjku people and retail outlets in the Maningrida region in Arnhem Land. My argument is that from a local perspective income management is just one of a suite of new measures that have been introduced to alter the norms and values of people to correlate more closely with Australian mainstream norms. This view is based on participant observation rather than direct questioning. Income management is a low priority issue for the Kuninjku people in the current policy maelstrom that seeks to shift policy from 'self-determination' back to a form of assimilation now heavily influenced by a neoliberal ideological agenda. Local responses vary from indifferent acceptance to resistance. I ponder the crucial policy question, how can we allow substantial financial resources to be squandered in unhelpful income management when they could be deployed productively to enhance wellbeing for Indigenous Australians?

Keywords: Aboriginal people, income management, Northern Territory, social policy, Maningrida region

Introduction

I. June 2015: I am chatting to my close classificatory Kuninjku sister Kay on the phone, in English and Kuninjku, she has rung me from the side camp in Maningrida asking about a payment due to her husband Johnny from a successful exhibition held at the Annandale Galleries in Sydney in April and May. It is coincidentally 30 June, the end of the financial year, but I am not sure that matters much to Kay, just that the payment was due in June. We chat about financial management and BasicsCard: it's good she says, and then grumbles 'but can't buy bakki [tobacco] with it'. Then she adds 'I am paid two-ways, every second Wednesday, Basics and Keycard, I get bakki using Keycard'.

II. October 2014: I interview the manager of one of the three local stores at Maningrida; each is dependent on access to BasicsCard for its viability, as Basics accounts for an estimated 30 per cent of turnover. To have BasicsCard facilities a store needs to be licenced, and licencing means that stores are regularly audited to check that BasicsCard is not used for prohibited items, which in Maningrida means tobacco. From time to time a bureaucrat arrives to check the store. The manager who has years of experience running a successful store in remote and difficult circumstances complains that bureaucrats go beyond their brief, starting to question the store's employment policy – that includes engaging backpackers from time to time – and procurement practices. The bureaucrats begin exercising their discretionary power to licence to delve into matters of local decision-making, undermining local authority.

III. August 2007: 'The welfare law reforms are especially worrying. I would draw the Committee's attention to recent research by Professor David Ribar, an American economist currently visiting the Australian National University who notes that the United States of America's measures to control the spending of welfare payments has had a high cost and limited benefits. … These welfare reforms are also non-discretionary for Indigenous people and hence discriminatory when compared to the general population. It is assumed that all Indigenous parents who are welfare recipients are feckless spenders whose incomes must be quarantined and controlled' (Evidence by Professor Jon Altman to the Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs).

These three vignettes represent three perspectives on income management: that of a member of the Kuninjku-speaking community with whom I have conducted research for 37 years; that of the manager of a local store that is regulated by a new licencing system introduced as an element of income management; and my own view nearly a decade ago as someone who vehemently opposed the income management statutory proposal when first mooted.

In this article I want to reflect a little on the policy instrument of income quarantining or 'management' from these three perspectives in relation to a particular place. This instrument was first introduced in 2007 as a part of the Northern Territory National Emergency Response (henceforth the Intervention).

A regulatory technology, the BasicsCard, was to be used as a debit card whereby a proportion of at least 50 per cent of the welfare income of residents of prescribed communities would need to be spent on 'basics' other than alcohol, tobacco, pornography, and gambling goods or services. The place I focus on is Maningrida, an Aboriginal town in central Arnhem Land and its environs where about thirty small outstation communities are located.

Income management has been a hotly contested issue in Indigenous policy. This is partly because it provides a means for the state to intervene in what are generally perceived to be the rights of individuals to spend their income, irrespective of source, as they decide; in advanced liberal democracies this right is assumed to be a fundamental human right that historically had been denied Indigenous Australians when they were treated as wards of the state or denizens without full rights as citizens (see Billings 2010; Bielefeld 2014a; 2014b). This contestation was exacerbated when it became clear the measure targeted Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory so was based on race or ethnicity; this is why passage of the *Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Welfare Reform) Act 2007* required suspension of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*.

Looking back on my own position on income management nearly ten years after its statutory introduction, I am surprised by the vehemence and consistency of my opposition to the measure, which can be demonstrated by three snapshots.

First, my opposition in 2007 was based on a concern that this measure would prove costly, discriminatory and ineffective – the last concern based on what little evidence could be gleaned internationally, as indicated in the opening vignette to this article (Altman 2007).

Then in 2010 in evidence to a Senate Inquiry that sought to retain income management and reinstate the *Racial Discrimination Act*, I raised concerns that while policy making should be based on cogent argument and empirical evidence, income management was based on neither (Altman 2010: 8–9). I noted that on the cogent argument side there has never been any explanation provided as to why 50 per cent of income should be quarantined and why these measures should be applied to all. On empirical evidence, I noted that governments supposedly committed to evidence-based policy making seem to have passed the laws and then searched for justifying evidence.

This really came home to me in 2012 when, as a part of a survey of nearly 100 Intervention evaluations, Susie Russell and I discovered not only that there was no original program logic to the raft of Intervention measures, but also that the Australian government had actually commissioned consultants to create such a program logic ex post facto in 2010. This consultants' report was publicly released in 2012 just as the original five-year Intervention was ending, although income management has continued as a part of the Stronger Futures laws (Altman & Russell 2012: 19).

I do not provide this introductory observation to justify my critique of income management. Indeed, my research has never focused exclusively on this instrument, which has been merely one in a suite of measures initially introduced to safeguard the wellbeing of Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory, 'in the name of the child' (Hinkson 2007).

It so happens that the income management regime did cost over $1 billion to implement (Buckmaster et al. 2012), and yet as the most comprehensive study to date shows (Bray et al. 2014), and as reported elsewhere in this volume, there is no conclusive evidence that it made any difference, either to the wellbeing of children, families, or communities. This of course raises critical questions about the opportunity cost of this measure.

I could go on with somewhat abstracted, now empirically verified critiques of the income management institution and the associated BasicsCard technique regarding its implementation, but that would fall into the trap of being blind-sided by Basics in one of several ways. First, by focusing on income management one can overlook the overarching state project of heightened governmentality in the name of improvement and the associated damage being wrought on remote living Indigenous people as concerted efforts are made to inculcate forms of neoliberal subjectivity. Second, such abstracted advocacy can become divorced from what is happening now in communities, what income management might mean to the people whose expenditure behaviour is to be modified, and the local-level organisations and businesses that have to implement this imposed and untested experimental approach.

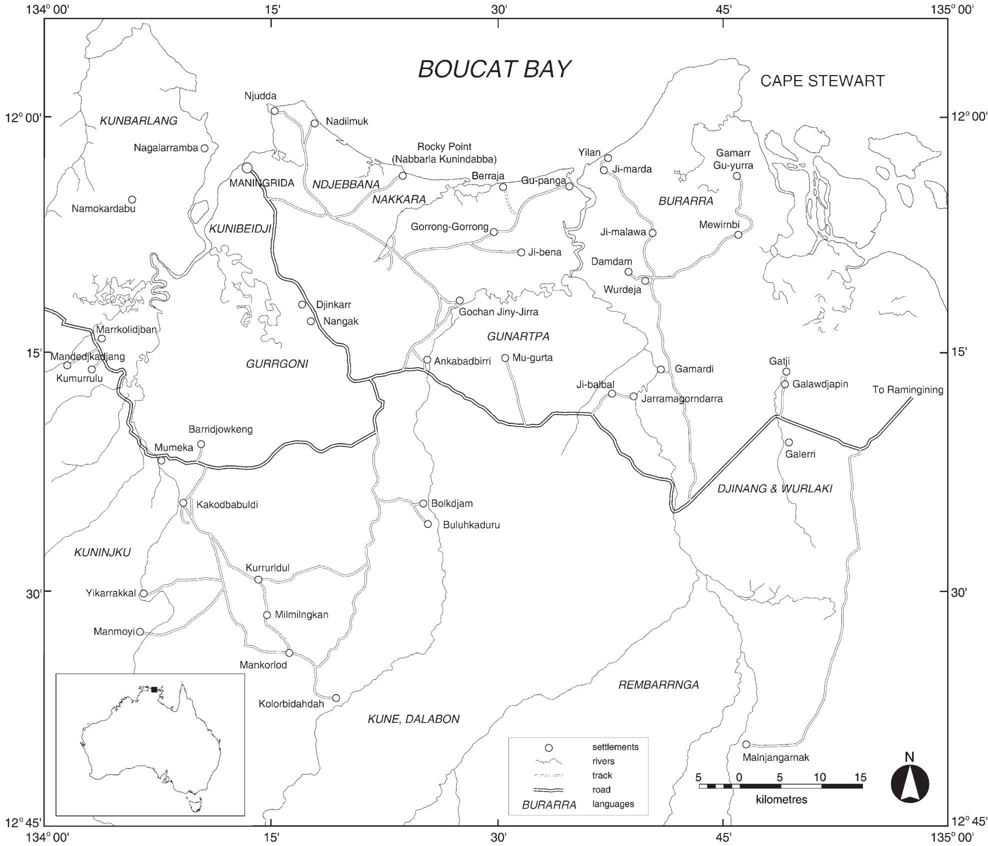
I cannot analyse in one article the complex web of actors who have devised and implemented income management or the diversity of people on whom this regime impacts. Rather I want to focus selectively on just two sets of actors, Kuninjku people in western Arnhem Land – with whom I have worked since 1979, and am professionally and emotionally entangled, as represented by 'sister' Kay in my opening vignette; and the staff of stores in the township of Maningrida, some of whom I have collaborated with over many years, represented by my second vignette. Let me begin by saying something about the place.

Maningrida and environs

Maningrida is a *sui generis* sort of place like most of the one thousand discrete Indigenous communities in remote Australia. Its distinguishing features are threefold.

First, it is one of the largest Indigenous-majority townships in Australia, with a population of about 3000, 10 per cent of whom are non-Indigenous. Second, the township is the service centre for a 10,000 sq km hinterland where there are 30 tiny hamlets called outstations. People live at the township and outstations, and there is much movement between town and country on both seasonal and longer-term bases. Third, the region is highly multilingual: there are numerous distinct languages spoken in the region, with the one hundred-plus clan groups owning land under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* divided into spatial language-speaking jurisdictions that replicate approximately the precolonial spread of people and languages (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Maningrida region



Maningrida was established in 1957 as a government settlement in contrast to most other communities in Arnhem Land that were missions and established earlier. Its political history in the nearly sixty years since can be roughly divided into three phases: colonial or 'hard' assimilation, 1957–1972; 'self-determination' on the state's terms – what I think of as 'soft' or less overt assimilation, 1973–2004; and then neoliberal assimilation from 2005 to the present (Altman 2014), most clearly evident during the Intervention period 2007–2012 that continues today rebadged as Stronger Futures for the Northern Territory. One can debate the timing of these phases and the precise meanings of my terminology intended here as indicative only. Some critical race theorists such as Irene Watson (2015) argue that assimilation is an ongoing undifferentiated process, given that power dynamics are still imbued with conflict and subjugation of Indigenous people. In her recent book Elizabeth Strakosch (2015) provides detailed discussion at the national level of various theories of the Australian neoliberal settler state.

The region today is part of the West Arnhem Shire established on 1 July 2008 by a reorganisation of local government in the Northern Territory; it is sociologically complex, as the Aboriginal population has multiple identities, with land ownership and language communities being most important. The township is an artificial construct, initially established to accommodate Aboriginal people repatriated out of Darwin. Then in the 1960s the township was used as a regional base for the social engineering project of assimilation.

Since the Intervention both the Commonwealth and NT governments have been in deep philosophical agreement that the township has potential for economic development and employment growth; for a time Maningrida was identified as a Territory Growth Town and Priority Community, terms that are rarely heard today. In accord with the Gillard Government's Indigenous Economic Development Strategy 2011–2018 – also rarely mentioned today but not officially abolished – development is only considered in mainstream Western terms. Such a categorisation is problematic not least because it ignores what is possible regionally and the nature of diverse local aspirations.

The regional economy is poorly integrated with global capitalism; exports of goods and services are limited to just two to three industries – the Aboriginal arts industry, and the provision of environmental, including carbon farming, and cultural services – where it has comparative advantage. This comparative advantage is highly dependent on production in the hinterland, so in economic terms Maningrida can be conceptualised primarily as a services centre delivering citizenship services and as an entrepôt; it was initially established in 1949 as a trading post, which only had a short life, by the colonial Northern Territory administration.

The commercial success of the region's export industries has been largely linked to the fortunes of the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation, which operated as an outstation resource agency since 1979 and a Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) organisation from 1989 to 2015. Having underwritten much of the regional economic activity for decades, the CDEP was abolished on 1 July 2015.

Despite a currently dominant narrative of failure, there has been regional demographic success, with the population increasing from about 1,500 in 1980 to over 3,000 now, an increase of three per cent per annum. This growth, however, has exacerbated the labour surplus issue in the township, resulting in very high state dependence and growing levels of inactivity – especially among the young – and has deeply entrenched poverty.

I have worked in the Maningrida region since 1979 and have made over 50 research visits there, 16 since the Intervention. I work there with people and institutions.

I share this brief historical overview to preface a crucial element of my argument – that income management is just part of the latest experimental form of social engineering currently being implemented by the Commonwealth government's 'advancement' policy on both the Kuninjku people and their major supporting organisations.

The most recent period of intervention has been intense and keenly felt in the Kuninjku community. People have lost CDEP; lost Bawinanga as an effective institution meeting their service needs, and so are in the process of being alienated from their homelands; and have lost much of their livelihood that was based on unconditional income support from the state, self-provisioning, and sale of art – what I refer to as a 'hybrid economy'. This local, community perspective became very clear to me in a series of interviews conducted in early 2015 and translated from Kuninjku into English by qualified translator Murray Garde (Altman 2015).

With the loss of CDEP, Bawinanga has been effectively depoliticised and is now more vulnerable than at any time since 1979 to government interference – it is highly unstable. Its prospects have been poor since insolvency and special administration between 2012 and 2014; it has been assisted financially by a loan of $3.5 million from its main competitor in town, the Maningrida Progress Association, and the shelving – not writing-off – of a debt of $6 million to the Commonwealth and NT governments.

One of the many things that Bawinanga did well over many years was to provide financial services to its members and other residents of Maningrida and outstations. The Bawinanga annual report for 2006–07, immediately prior to the Intervention, indicates that the organisation assisted members and staff with a raft of financial and community services: online banking; internet banking; truck accounts – of which there were 200, or one-third of the CDEP payroll saving for vehicles; bill-saving authorised deductions from CDEP; ceremonial support, again via payroll deductions; assistance to borrow money; and assistance to access services (Manners 2007). These member services have now been supposedly replaced by the income management mechanism.

Income management: changing Indigenous subjectivity; regulating their organisations

As already noted, income management was introduced in the Maningrida region as elsewhere in the Northern Territory as part of the Intervention, with no program logic (Altman & Russell 2012). Its introduction was based on an ongoing and increasingly dominant public discourse that can be understood as what Foucault (1980: 131) has termed a 'Regime of Truth': forms of knowledge and speech acts that frame social problems in a particular way, in this case destructive spending of welfare payments; imagined government-directed interventions, in this case the technology of the BasicsCard; and envision the characteristics of desirable citizens properly spending their welfare that such interventions will purportedly create.

The narrative promulgated by the popular media, informed by political and bureaucratic elites as well as some influential Indigenous and non-Indigenous opinion leaders, presented as unchallengeable a view that Indigenous welfare recipients in general waste their income on alcohol, tobacco, pornography and gambling. These Indigenous welfare recipients stood accused of being universally culpable for neglecting their children and wasting welfare income and something drastic had to be done about this (see Hinkson 2007; Macoun 2012; Proudfoot & Habibis 2016; Roffee 2016, inter alia).

It is too easy today to overlook the extraordinarily powerful negative representations of Aboriginality that dominated political and policy discourse as a justification for the introduction of income management among other paternalistic Intervention measures. Aboriginal men in particular were represented as savage and primitive and their children in urgent need of protection. Howey (2012), Macoun (2012), and Partridge (2014) have provided detailed critical analysis of this dominant discourse.

Income management provides an opportunity to conduct social experimentation with a new form of electronic technology for governing the expenditures of Aboriginal subjects (Altman 2014; Bielefeld 2014; Strakosch 2015). It represented an aspirational governmental technology to quarantine welfare for the sole benefit of individual recipients and their dependents, the imagined intended beneficiaries. How effective has this instrument been in practice for the Kuninjku community?

Altering expenditure patterns and sharing practices

It is difficult to undertake rigorous assessment of whether this technology has succeeded in directing welfare recipients to healthy living, primarily because it was not designed to do so. The Basicscard does not limit what one purchases, it just excludes tobacco and alcohol that are purchased with the 'free – or what Kuninjku call *najalan* (unrestricted) – part of one's welfare.

The BasicsCard, when stripped of all its paternalist rhetoric and connotations, is technically similar to a debit card that holds 50 per cent of welfare income. But besides the BasicsCard individuals usually hold another debit card or Keycard where the balance of their welfare income is deposited.

The card is effective in the Maningrida context as a debit card when it works and when it is not lost, stolen or borrowed.[1] Hence the opening comment by Kay, similar to views regularly voiced by my Kuninjku interlocutors – the BasicsCard is not a significant issue for Kuninjku, it is a second-order issue when compared with other current concerns and anxieties: the loss of the Community Development Employment Program that provided many Kuninjku adults with a guaranteed basic income, the decline in arts income after the Global Financial Crisis, the decline in homelands support, and the reduced access to vehicles and to firearms owing to increased, arguably too much, policing (Altman 2015).

The BasicsCard can be bothersome when one shops and carelessly exceeds the available credit on the card. And the card does represent an infringement of people's right to privacy because expenditures can be monitored by a third party without the informed consent of the card holder. If remote work-for-the-dole is tightly policed, the card could be yet another means by which to monitor the 'no show no pay rule' and breach (penalise) welfare beneficiaries for non-attendance, as the time and place of card use is electronically recorded. The BasicsCard is another technology in the growing armoury of the panoptic disciplinary surveillance of the state that can track where and when people are using their card. However, in general Kuninjku are unaware and unconcerned about such potential magical powers.

Time and again it has been shown in evaluations that there is no proof that the BasicsCard makes a difference to expenditure on healthy foods (see especially Bray et al. 2014). Table 1 provides just one example from a period in my research when I was recording what had happened to tobacco sales and fresh fruit and vegetable sales during the first five years of the Intervention.

Table 1: Sales of tobacco and fresh fruit and vegetables, at a Maningrida store

Fruit and vegetable sales (year ending 30 June)

	Amount $	Percentage of total turnover
2012	197,320	2.4
2011	197,282	2.5
2010	202,035	2.8
2009	185,395	2.8
2008	171,257	3.3

Tobacco sales (year ending 30 June)

	Amount $	Percentage of total turnover
2012	1,536,070	18.7
2011	1,527,644	19.6
2010	1,355,022	18.5
2009	1,138,864	17.0
2008	832,529	16.2

The evidence in Table 1 suggests that there has been little change.

In July 2015 I interviewed five staff of two of the three shops in Maningrida – Maningrida Progress Association store and Balmarrk supermarket. The third shop – One 68 General Store – did not respond to my request. The consensus among these outlets, who are competitors, is the same: there is no evidence that tobacco sales have changed in the last three years since the data in Table 1 were collected; and the BasicsCard does not direct consumers to healthy food, or even to food, for that matter – it just ensures 50 per cent of welfare income is not spent on tobacco, that can be bought at the store, and alcohol, that cannot be bought and needs to be ordered.

As an aside, alcohol in Maningrida is purchased by holders of a permit with orders managed by the Maningrida Progress Association.[2] BasicsCard cannot be used for this purpose. There are strict controls on access to alcohol for Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals and rules that infringed can lead to loss of licence for variable periods. Currently there are about 300 liquor licences issued, with an estimated 150-plus held by non-Indigenous people. It is estimated that non-Indigenous people constituting about 10 per cent of the regional population regularly purchase over 50 per cent of fortnightly sales, with many more holding B permits that allow the purchase of wine. In total the allocation rarely exceeds 200 carton equivalents a fortnight, with total expenditure less than on fruit and vegetables and a lot less than tobacco.[3]

Day-to-day budgeting is hard for Kuninjku – people today are often hungry. Requests for assistance from family never cease; income is highly irregular depending on whether one is breached and the level of supplementation from arts income; and prices for goods and services are high, although they are not as high in Maningrida as in other remote communities where prices can exceed Darwin prices by 50 per cent (Ferguson et al. 2015). There is no evidence that the paternalistic intent of BasicsCard is making any difference to expenditure patterns and health outcomes, so how can the cost of income management be justified? Taking an average from the 2015–16 federal Budget, the cost of income management nationally is about $3,000 per participant per annum (Cox 2015), and with 950 unemployed in Maningrida at least $3 million per annum is expended on this ineffective institution. The opportunity cost of this waste is significant: it could be used to directly subsidise the cost of fruit and vegetables; or to help reignite community based organisations like Bawinanga that facilitate livelihood opportunities.

Blackmailing the stores

There is growing recognition that BasicsCard and income management are not effective in changing the behaviour of individual consumers, families or communities. While the BasicsCard does allow the expenditures of individuals to be monitored, to what end remains unclear. Conscious that the initial aim of BasicsCard has proven ineffective, the responsible state agency and its minister face a dilemma. There has been an extraordinary investment of public funds allocated to income management. This has has created a significant bureaucratic architecture and capital infrastructure – that includes the card, card readers, kiosks and hotlines – as a sunken investment that no-one is motivated to dismantle: there is political and bureaucratic inertia or path dependency that is seeing no change: no-one wants to be held directly accountable for the waste. In particular, as noted above, no-one wants to address the opportunity cost of income management – the alternatives that could be funded with the more than $1 billion that has been spent nationally on the measure to date (Buckmaster et al. 2012).

Failing to modify the expenditure patterns of individuals who have their own strong views on how to spend their money and how to share, a new mechanism – store licencing – has emerged as an attempt to modify the behaviour of store governing bodies and managers. This provides yet another means to interfere in community affairs, alongside mechanisms to interfere in employment and training programs via the Remote Jobs and Communities Program recently re-labelled the Community Development Programme, and in education via the School Enrolment and Attendance Measures and through the deployment of School Attendance Officers, whose job is to round up kids and get them to attend classes.

There may well be some stores in some places that require state surveillance and regulation. It is not clear, though, if the deployment of the Merchant Approval

Framework and Merchant Approval Policy[4] – which see government officials decide if a store should be granted the BasicsCard facility – will ensure enhanced store integrity or more competitive prices.

In the Maningrida case much of this oversight is interpreted by local store management and staff to involve officials with little or no retail background holding their experienced and successful store management boards and managers to ransom (interviews July 2015). The leverage available to these officials is that BasicsCard purchases accounts for an estimated 30 per cent of store turnover, and stores without this facility will be uncompetitive and financially unviable. And so the threat to remove a store licence, whether stated explicitly as in or on the quiet, is powerful.

In this regard, the Australian government documentation for the merchant approval framework carries the message 'a strong and fair society for *all Australians*'. But at the same time, in a rather totalitarian manner, documentation states that merchant eligibility 'is dependent upon the Merchant supporting the primary outcome of BasicsCard' with the stated policy rationale to facilitate access to priority goods and services, which means just about everything except excluded goods and services. There is a danger that, as with other government programs, store boards and managers will be politically muzzled by state authorities.[5]

There are three problems with this approach.

First, visiting officials delve into issues that are beyond their immediate concerns or capabilities to assess, such as the employment practices, display practices and purchasing priorities of stores. In particular, in Maningrida there have been recent problems in recruiting local surplus labour to work at stores, and so backpackers and other outsiders have been engaged. This is interpreted by visiting bureaucrats as a problem with store practice rather than with the overarching labour market situation and issues of poor incentives and work motivations. In communities like Maningrida this situation is greatly influenced by the now-acknowledged failure of the RJCP (that has now been replaced by the Community Development Programme) to engage local labour.

Second, there is the problem of officials intervening where they should not and not interfering where they should – a problem akin to what are known as Type 1 and Type II errors. This has been very evident in Maningrida with the two large and successful community owned stores being over-scrutinised, and a potentially problematic private enterprise third store being licenced prior to establishment and being under-scrutinised despite complaints about retail and environmental health practice – allegations that should at least be properly investigated.

Third, as the second opening vignette states, expert local knowledge is 'disqualified' because it is in conflict with the established 'Regime of Truth', that is, that Aboriginal people need to have their drinking and gambling habits, and access to pornography and tobacco curtailed, and that the BasicsCard will play an important role in modifying the expenditure patterns of those on welfare irrespective of their behaviour. Local expertise is constantly challenged rather than being acknowledged (Checketts 2016).

Conclusion: blind-sided by Basics

Income management and the technology of BasicsCard is a significant symbolic remnant of the National Emergency 'Regime of Truth'. Evidence that challenges this complex and expensive architecture is discounted: ideology is trumping evidence. This has been very blatantly illustrated by the immediate dismissal of the finding of the comprehensive Bray and colleagues evaluation (2014) by Kevin Andrews, then Minister for Social Services (Davidson 2014).

Such blatant evasion of empirical findings is evident in a number of program areas in the Maningrida region. For example, there is growing evidence that CDEP was better than welfare and that outstations living is often more productive than township living; and that organisations like Bawinanga that are community controlled have been more effective than the government in creating jobs, providing training, and setting up viable businesses (Altman 2008).

Such evidence should see the shift of dollars – currently allocated to income management that amounts to several million dollars per annum in public tax-payer funds in a place like Maningrida – to more productive purposes. But such rationality does not apply to marginal populations and marginal issues. In terms of political accountability there is none: the dominant discourses that have established the new Regime of Truth emphasise that it is irresponsible Aboriginal individuals who are solely accountable for their circumstances, and that marginalisation and poverty is a function of each individual's agency and not socio-political structure, history, remoteness, or discrimination.

The scales of justice (Fraser 2009) are tipped heavily against local empowerment: there is no recognition that Indigenous forms of relational distribution might be more legitimate and effective than reliance on a plastic card managed by the state; there is no mechanism for (re)presentation of local views with so-called consultation shown time and again to be about gaining endorsement for predetermined measures; there is no redistribution of the senseless expenditure on the BasicsCard to alternatives, such as fresh food or freight subsidies or local projects.

In Maningrida, local people like the Kuninjku do not hold strong views about the BasicsCard.[6] Some retailers in Maningrida say it is useful as a savings device, others that it would be far more useful if it allowed hire purchase. Some people struggle to ensure they have sufficient credit before shopping, but from my observations people in queues are tolerant of those who get to the counter and have to return items – it is mainly impatient time-poor *balandas* (non-Indigenous people) who seem perplexed on such occasions, and overworked shop staff who have the unenviable task of returning handled goods to the shelf.

BasicsCard is just one of a number of instruments that have been devised to modify the conduct of Indigenous Australians – as consumers, workers (Community Development Programme), and juveniles and their parents (School Enrolment and Attendance Measures). But this targeting of individuals for behavioural modification needs a community based regulator: people can be punished electronically from afar, but the state needs local agents, and this in turn is creating tensions and divisions within communities as stores, employment and training providers, and schools increasingly need to align with the state to survive and so employ people who will do such work. Each is being depoliticised and co-opted as an active agent in the state project of behaviour modification (see also Watson 2015); or else these organisations are becoming inherently unstable in the midst of ongoing tensions between community members and their reformed organisations.

Government policy is looking to alter Indigenous subjectivities to those of rational *homo economicus* focused on self-interested individualism. But a very different *homo reciprocans* and an associated relational ontology remain strong in remote Arnhem Land, even if people like the Kuninjku are far from well-off. There are many forms that Aboriginal resistance strategies take, including through the deployment of a counter narrative (Bielefeld 2014b). In relation to the BasicsCard in Maningrida, Kuninjku exchange cards, exchange food, exchange store food for *bakki* [tobacco], exchange store food for bush food. *Bininj* (Aboriginal) resistance is evident in many walks of life – there is ceremonial hypertrophy so as to avoid regimented work for the dole, public displays of large gambling rings flaunting police directives, and tensions with unregistered vehicles and unlicenced drivers as people seek to maintain connections with their country in the hinterland and find ways to circumvent the panoptic state (Altman 2015).

And yet there is also a local awareness among the Kuninjku that they are more impoverished, have less cash, are getting less food, and are more disempowered than at any time since the 1960s and early 1970s when Maningrida was a total institution during the colonial era. It is important to record and critique the failed BasicsCard policy period for the historical record, hopeful that some lessons might be learnt about how not to do things in future.

I began with three vignettes, to which I now return. Local people like the Kuninjku in the Maningrida region refuse to be blind-sided by Basics – nor are they blind to the intent of the state project of improvement to fundamentally alter their subjectivities, and in this knowledge they resist by actively maintaining their norms and values. The shops tolerate BasicsCard but are acutely aware that this is a regulatory strategy that is looking to exercise state power over their autonomy. As for me, I readily admit that in the past I was blind-sided by Basics, expending research and advocacy efforts to try and influence a policy process that was immutable: now I mainly abhor the waste of scarce tax-payer resources defined as Indigenous expenditure that could be deployed far more productively on community controlled development projects.

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Endnotes

[1] This can be contrasted with findings by Bray and fellow researchers (2014: 136–139) about inconvenience experienced by users of BasicsCard in more urban and less remote contexts.

[2] Northern Territory Government (2016) 'Apply for an individual liquor permit: how to apply: liquor permit application for Maningrida general restricted area', 27 April, https://nt.gov.au/law/alcohol/apply…permit (accessed 23 October 2016).

[3] In Maningrida, a carton of full-strength beer costs $70, and mid-strength $60.

[4] BasicsCard Merchant Approval Framework Policy Guidelines, August 2014, https://www.dss.gov.au…pdf (accessed 7 March 2016).

[5] For example, a constantly amended document, Remote Jobs and Communities Programme Guidelines Handbook, effective 7 September 2015, notes 'If Providers are approached by persons (e.g., students) or organisations conducting research projects who are seeking access to Work for the Dole Activity sites or premises, Providers must first contact PM&C to obtain consent' …. 'If a Provider is approached by a MP or Senator or the media regarding publicity they should seek advice from PM&C before making any commitment' (65); see Answers to questions on notice from Melbourne Public Hearing, 19 February 2016, provided by PM&C, received 26 February 2016, http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees (accessed 6 March 2016).

[6] A rare but memorable occasion when I have seen strong views publicly expressed by Aboriginal people in Maningrida was on 31 July 2009 during 'consultations' over the continuation of BasicsCard. This has been reported elsewhere. I suspect the main issue that angered people was that they were given no choice – government officials told them that the continuation of BasicsCard was not negotiable; see 'Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee (Reference: Social Security And Other Legislation Amendment (Welfare Reform And Reinstatement Of Racial Discrimination Act) Bill 2009), Friday, 26 February 2010', Canberra, http://www.aph.gov.au (accessed 6 March 2016).

About the Authors

Jon Altman is a research professor at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, Deakin University. Before that he was at the Australian National University from 1978, spending 20 years (1990–2010) as Foundation Director of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research. He is currently affiliated as an ANU Emeritus Professor with the School of Regulation and Global Governance (RegNet). Altman has disciplinary training in economics and anthropology and has worked closely with Kuninjku-speaking people in western Arnhem Land since 1979.

Marcus Banks is a researcher with the School of Economics, Finance and Marketing at RMIT. He is the lead author of 'Caught Short', an ARC Linkage-funded report detailing the experiences of low-income Australians who borrow small loans from the short-term moneylending or 'payday' loan market. The report has had a significant impact on national and international policy debates about the appropriate level of regulation for the sector.

Shelley Bielefeld is the Inaugural Braithwaite Research Fellow at the School of Regulation and Global Governance (RegNet) at the ANU. Her research concerns social justice issues affecting Australia's First Peoples, including problems arising from the Northern Territory Intervention begun in 2007, and from the Stronger Futures framework begun in 2012. Her work on Indigenous policy and law is influenced by the concerns expressed by people subject to those strictures.

J. Rob Bray is a Research Fellow in the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University. Prior to joining the ANU in 2010 he had a long career in the Australian Public Service in a range of social policy and related portfolios. At the ANU he has undertaken policy and program evaluations in addition to research focused on the interaction of economic and social policy, the Australian minimum wage, and income distribution.

Sally Cowling is the Director, Centre for Research, Innovation and Advocacy at Uniting NSW/ACT. Her research interests include reform options for social policy, service delivery environments, and funding arrangements that support the development of human capability and interdependence and stimulate empowering and innovative practice.

Matthew Gray is Professor of Public Policy and Director of the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods. He has published on a wide range of economic